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ASSOCIATIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS

LEWIS G. THOMAS

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One of the privileges of the President of the Canadian Historical Association is to deliver an address on a topic of his own choosing and to deliver it without prior warning to his audience of the nature of the topic. This is the first occasion, I believe, on which your President has stood before you to perform this particular duty without the defence of a special uniform. The Canadian Historical Association has an appropriate respect for tradition but this is not the first time that we have changed the drill for the Presidential Address. Once upon a time, as a kind of requiem for the departure of the social scientists into associations of their own, it was the custom for the Presidents of the Canadian Political Science Association and this Association to render a duet. It made a long evening. Then we adopted the practice of lulling potential listeners into a false sense of security by encouraging them to buy a more or less elaborate dinner. But as provincial liquor laws grew more permissive and the price of dinners rose quite as steadily this practice too seemed ripe for abandonment. Thus I stand before you, hungry and thirsty as you well may be, without even the decent cover of a dinner jacket.

It would however be wrong to commit the more serious impropriety of failing to place my remarks within the setting of the tradition of presidential addresses. These have fallen into two major categories, a discussion of a particular aspect of the incumbent's scholarly activity or more general observations on the state of the historical discipline in Canada. Though I was much tempted to offer for your edification a paper on the provenance of lesser known church furnishings in the rural deanery of Pembina an unfortunate technological breakdown involving the indispensable coloured slides precluded this possibility. My paper falls more or less into the second class and some of it tries to deal with the concerns of this Association and with the peculiar circumstances in which historians have operated, and continue to operate, in Canada. This is not, you will agree, an entirely new subject.

My paper also attempts to say something about communication, and particularly about communication between the regions of Canada, especially between the prairie west and central Canada. The matter of communication has engaged Canadian minds as profound as those of Innis and McLuhan; this has made it one into which one necessarily ventures not without trepidation. But if it is assumed that communication is the basis of understanding, its impairment between the Canadian regions becomes a concern of the historian. To speak of

western separatism as if it were close to being an accomplished fact is ridiculous but western alienation, not from Canada as an idea but from the central provinces as an abstraction, seems to me to be an interesting even though occasionally an uncomfortable reality. Superficially at least this lack of empathy with the attitudes and ideas of the Canadian heartland becomes more apparent the further west one moves. But the western provinces have an identity of their own and, as I am rather more familiar with Alberta than with her sisters, I am in danger of generalizing more than I should from her experience.

This may seem to be remote from any concern of the Association except insofar as it may touch upon some regional or provincial sensitivity that affects the patterns of Canadian history. I suggest however that the experience of this Association throws some light upon the system of internal communications that was established in Canada in the first half century of her history, a system of communication that in her second half century has been seriously impaired. Our Association was very much a product of this internal network; we are conscious today that we must at least look to it to see that our own communications do not fall into disrepair or even become obsolete.

The Canadian Historical Association has now had a life of more than half a century; characteristically, and most becomingly, we celebrated our fiftieth anniversary by commemorating the hundredth birthday of the Public Archives of Canada, the national institution that provides the foundation for the study of Canadian history. The C.H.A. came into being in Ottawa on May 18, 1922. It grew out of the Historic Landmarks Association of Canada, itself the child of the Royal Society of Canada and the forerunner not only of the C.H.A. but also of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board. The C.H.A. can thus claim to be the oldest of the national associations representing particular academic disciplines that together constitute the "learned societies" of this country, whose clusters of annual meetings have become a feature of the Canadian academic scene. The Canadian Historical Association has by no means provided a model for later organizations though it may with some fairness be said that they have sought to profit from our experience even though they do not attempt to emulate our patterns of behaviour.

The Canadian Historical Association was one of the later blossoms in the flowering of Canadian history that took place in the first quarter of the twentieth century and provided us with the institutional framework which fifty years later still survives. The recognition of history as a respectable academic discipline had by that time been marked by the establishment of chairs of history at the leading Canadian universities; courses specifically in the history of Canada had been introduced

at most of them. The Public Archives of Canada was firmly established as a centre for research in Canadian history and the summer pilgrimage to Ottawa was becoming an accepted obligation for the serious student. The commissioning of cooperative works that would permit the publication of the fruits of Canadian historical scholarship was signalized by series like *The Chronicles of Canada* and *The Makers of Canada* and above all by the appearance of *Canada and its Provinces*. In 1920 the Canadian Historical Review began publication; here George M. Wrong and his colleagues at Toronto were building on the foundation provided by their *Review of Publications Relating to Canada*, itself founded in 1896. The Champlain Society was well launched upon its dual rôle of making more available the classics of Canadian source material and broadening and deepening the public interest in the Canadian past, especially the interest of those eminent figures in Canadian life sufficiently well-to-do to use their means to fertilize the still rather stony soil of the dominion of the north.

We can recognize here the outlines of a national historical establishment with the new Association cast in the rôle of a coordinating agency. The construction of the edifice owed much to the efforts of a relatively small number of men. Among them were George M. Wrong, the founding father of the Department of History at the University of Toronto, Sir Arthur Doughty of the Public Archives, Adam Shortt, with Doughty co-editor of *Canada and its Provinces*, and, perhaps a less familiar figure, Lawrence J. Burpee. Burpee was an extraordinarily many-sided man; how he found time to do all the things he did, from running the International Joint Commission to taking an active interest in the Boy Scouts, from gardening to editing the *La Vérendrye* journals, boggles the mind. It is to Burpee more than to any other individual that Chester Martin¹ attributed the emergence of the Canadian Historical Association. It is a pity that no one has made a study of Burpee; he seems to have been at the heart of the cultural life of English Canada at an important point in its development.

I find myself very curious about the nature of the Canada, and particularly of the Ottawa, that provided the background against which men like Burpee carried on their multitude of activities. Whether one speaks of the nation or of the nation's capital, it seems to have been a very tight and cosy society, a society where everyone knew each other. Though they did not necessarily like one another they knew how each fitted into the structure, the peculiar interests that each had and to whom to go when something had to be done. Ottawa was a small city, Canada was a country with a small population. The number of people of sufficient means, education and position to give leadership was

exceedingly limited and communication between them was, because they could know each other so well, very easy. The ramifications of this society extended into every Canadian city of any size, and a net of relationships existed, based on family ties, school and university friendships and a community of manners and interests. The number of people involved minimized the problem of communication, but the latter was further eased and promoted by the fact that this segment of society enjoyed a considerable degree of leisure. This is not to suggest that these were not busy and energetic people; it is however difficult to escape the impression that in the first four decades of the twentieth century the lives of the more or less educated classes of Canada were less frenetic than they have been since the war of 1939-45. Though they lived comparatively well, they also lived comparatively simply. In today's more affluent society the pursuit of gracious living takes a great deal of time. It may also be remarked that in those remote decades even clergymen and professors had servants; as far as I know the last house in Edmonton to be equipped with a system of bells for internal communication was built by a professor of history.

The Canadian Historical Association was very much a child of this period and its progress, like that of some of the other byproducts of the fertile and busy minds of the cultural entrepreneurs of the time, was disappointing. Indeed after ten years of its life one of its most active members remarked that it "tended to remain . . . an adjunct of the Royal Society" and that, although by then "launched upon an independent career," it lagged "far behind its counterpart in the United States".² It would be too much to say that the slow development of the Association was the result of its dependence upon an outgrown and no longer relevant network of relationships though it may be true that, in the eyes of many of its members after 1945, and in the eyes of many more who did not become members, it seemed to be slow to shake off this dependence. Communication within the body of historians in Canada, between historians in Canada and historians elsewhere, and between Canadian historians and the Canadian public, is surely the essential business of this Association. It is my impression that as a body we are not as good as we should be at this, though there are spectacular examples of successful interventions by individual historians in all these areas. It is difficult to escape an uneasy feeling that we have found no adequate substitute for the informal network for communication that existed before 1939 but which had conclusively broken down even before Canadians intent on crossing the nation took to the airplane and abandoned the club cars of the transcontinental railways, those superb vehicles for the leisurely exchange of trans-Canada gossip.

This system of internal communication depended heavily upon

what for convenience may be called social contiguity. This was more than a cluster of attitudes, values or convictions held in common. These had to be supported by opportunities for more or less frequent meetings for the exchange of information, for encounters that were essentially informal and often accidental. It depended upon some degree of education, the possession of some means and, much more important, some leisure. It was a system that worked efficiently in the small Canadian cities of our earlier history. The vast distances of Canada presented obvious difficulties in extending such an establishment to national proportions and in terms of the west these difficulties might well have seemed insurmountable. But even in the prairie west it proved possible to reproduce the same kinds of intimate contact between those in a position to forward development that eased for men like Wrong and Burpee the establishment of organizations like the Canadian Historical Association.

We may find the roots of this success in the fur-trading past. Though the officers of the Hudson's Bay Company and the missionaries were not always on the most amicable of terms they could at least communicate with one another. Both groups accepted the idea of an orderly society, though they might differ as to the means by which such a society could be brought into being. They might deplore the impact of settlement upon the fur trade or the threat of civilization to their Indian converts but they did not seriously question the values of the society which John A. Macdonald and his colleagues planned to extend from sea to sea. Though the process of submergence by a tide of newcomers was never wholly palatable the peculiar society that had developed among the English-speaking people of Red River put up no concerted resistance. Their leaders were indeed as committed to the virtues of growth as any twentieth century politician. The French-speaking there were in no stronger position. Their clergy were ambivalent and the handful of new pioneers from Quebec were as much developers as their associates from the Eastern Townships, the Maritimes, Ontario, the United Kingdom or the United States. As far as there was an established order in the Prairie West it submitted to the new without more than a grumble and many found comfortable places in it. A Red River inheritance was to prove no handicap in a growing centre like Calgary, where the Anglican bishop, the magistrate, a prominent lawyer and the most enterprising leader of business all had this affiliation. The society planned for the new West was not one which the Indian and the *metis* could easily find congenial or even acceptable but mixed blood in itself did not constitute a barrier to successful adaptation to it. The values of the missionary and the fur trader were sufficiently those of nineteenth century Britain to ease their passage and that of their children into an order that

substantially accepted those values.

What Canadian governments, and what may be roughly described as the informed Canadian public, envisaged for the west was as far as it could possibly be from an unplanned and chaotic movement of the frontier of Ontario. The plan was essentially for an orderly development based on a body of information about the territory involved. This was the plan: what happened in its execution was something rather different as the first Riel rising quickly demonstrated. That at least proved not only that potentialities for serious disturbance existed but that these could drastically affect the balance of relations between French and English speaking Canadians. The North West Mounted Police was created to maintain domestic order as a preliminary to settlement. It succeeded in realizing the intentions of its founders by functioning not merely as a police force but as the arm of the federal administration. Its members were not only policemen; they were the Prairie West's first civil servants and social workers.

It was apparent that a large movement of population into the prairie west could be supported only by agricultural development but it is doubtful whether the promotion of settlement on a large scale was the primary concern of the post-Confederation administrations. Their attention was directed not so much to the peopling of the region as to the orderly and profitable exploitation of its resources, its mines, forests and grass as much as its arable lands. Thus the quality of the immigrants was even more important than the quantity. The possibilities for grazing cattle, horses and sheep in vast numbers were early recognized and ranching developed in southern Alberta well before the building of the Canadian Pacific, for the needs of the Indian provided a local market. Yet even the kind of development envisaged for the west in the 1870's required improved communications and, in the circumstances of the latter part of the nineteenth century, the pre-occupation of the Macdonald governments with railway building is wholly understandable. The expansion and prosperity of ranching, as much as that of mining or lumbering, depended ultimately upon the provision of markets beyond the possible limits of the cattle drive, markets that only a railway could open.

The development of a grazing industry in the west fitted admirably into the central government's conception of the part of the region was to play in the national development. Ranching provided a means of utilizing land which was regarded as unsuitable for tillage; it accorded with the less optimistic of those estimates of the west's agricultural potential available to government. The development of ranching on the southwestern prairies of Canada proceeded more or less contempor-

aneously with the development of ranching in the western United States, but, as a recent study has made clear,³ ranching north of the 49th parallel was not simply an extension of the American industry; it had a distinct character of its own. Capital came from eastern Canada and the United Kingdom; good connections with the Conservative party were useful in obtaining leases, though there are indications that Macdonald put development before patronage and even his tolerance was strained by the greed of his partisans. Management was, with few exceptions, in the hands of eastern Canadians or Britons. American cowboys appeared but their skills were soon acquired by men of Canadian or British birth. The ranchers and their wives, accustomed as they were to the amenities of life available to the well-off in eastern Canada or Britain, quickly developed a way of living and a system of social contacts that bore little resemblance to the stereotype of the frontier.

The ranchers found no difficulty in cooperating with the Mounted Police, drawn as the latter were from much the same sort of social background. They had a close relationship with Calgary, which soon replaced Fort Macleod as the capital of the ranching kingdom, and this was a social as well as a business relationship, extending into such institutions as the Anglican church, of which many of the ranchers were adherents. The ranchers also maintained a close connection with the federal government while it was in Conservative hands and even managed to retain some degree of influence at Ottawa in the Laurier period, though they found this hard to sustain after their sworn enemy Frank Oliver, the dedicated friend of the farmer-settler, became Minister of the Interior.

Much of western Canada, and not only the ranchers' paradise in the foothills of southwestern Alberta, was well adapted to the raising of beef on the large scale that the rancher's command of capital made possible. As drought and depression made painfully evident, especially during the 1930's, the breaking of much of the prairie sod was a disaster. It was a disaster foreseen by a few agriculturalists and by a few government servants who, like William Pearce, had some perception of the consequences of the climatic cycle which in successive years of drought would erode the fertile soil that in an occasional wet year could provide such a bountiful crop. Pearce espoused the cause of irrigation, viewing it as a valuable support for the grazing which was the most obvious use of much of the land. The ranchers saw him as an ally and gave him substantial evidence of their appreciation of his support. But the pattern of land use visualized by Pearce and the ranchers was one of large holdings linked to and supported by the hard work of producing crops on irrigated land. Such an economy could be the

basis of an hierarchically organized society of large land holders and agricultural workers, a kind of society which held no horrors for those who were ready, and indeed eager, to idealize the social order of agricultural England. But while a society so conceived might appeal to Anglican missionaries, Mounted Police officers, well-to-do ranchers and prosperous professional and business men in the towns, and seem quite reasonable to civil servants in Ottawa or Calgary, it was a conception singularly out of touch with the public mind of Canada in the 1890's and the 1900's, obsessed as it was by the conviction that the small family farm was the only sure foundation for the economic, social and political health of individual and nation alike. Nor were the vast majority of potential settlers in the United States or across the Atlantic in the British Isles or on the continent of Europe likely to be attracted to a country which openly espoused ideas that they could only see as hopelessly reactionary. Certainly the politician could not swim against such a tide and he hastened to identify himself with policies that would put a working farmer and his family on every quarter section in the prairie west.

Though this ideal was mercifully left unrealized settlement flowed into the west in the two decades prior to the war of 1914-18 at a rate that, given the fact that no rational pattern of land use was enforced, was far beyond its absorptive capacity. The complaints of the western farmer about his exploitation by eastern business stem ultimately from the hard fact that he was attempting what was next to impossible even on the best of western farm land and under the most favourable of prairie climatic conditions. None but the most exceptionally fortunate and the most exceptionally provident could make the quarter section family farm a continuing financial success; the unit was too small to begin with and it could not generate sufficient additional capital to permit its enlargement to an economic size by consolidation with adjacent small properties. The farmer's grievances against the grain trade, the elevator companies, the railways, the banks and the federal government that maintained what was to him an iniquitous tariff structure were real grievances but behind them lay the fact that he had been permitted and indeed encouraged to place himself in an impossible situation.

Western alienation is rooted in this colossal national blunder. The settler himself entered all too willingly into what he saw as the road to new opportunities for himself and his family. The politicians failed to find a means of shaping policies that would have given the pressure for development more creative direction. Those in positions of authority, though like William Pearce often not wholly unaware of the dangers inherent in indiscriminate settlement, failed to make an effective case

for restraint either to the politicians or to the public. The network of internal communications, though it worked well enough in such matters as placing the ranchers' case before the government, could not function effectively when it came to dealing with a matter so highly charged emotionally as settlement.

The case of the rancher seems particularly instructive. The use for grazing of enormous quantities of allegedly arable land, thus withholding it from development as intensively cultivated family farms, was in the circumstances of the 1890's something it would have been impossible to justify. Even in southern Alberta, where the ranchers were well established, where they could count on support among influential townspeople and where they were admirably placed to exert influence, the cause of rational land use was hopelessly handicapped. They fought a skilful rearguard action, making astute use of the terrain and withdrawing to the foothills and to areas whose aridity was so obvious that, if they did not repel the homesteader, he was at least quickly discouraged. The cattle industry survived but the network of communications, and especially its social component, was drastically impaired. The cattleman could no longer see himself as an essential part of the force behind Canadian development with an important rôle in the creation and maintenance in the Canadian west of a society consonant with his traditional values. He was instead beleaguered by a new order that stigmatized him, not as a conservative in the best sense of the word, but as the blackest of reactionaries. Deprived of any sense of playing a truly Canadian part it is not surprising that, in one generation or another, he comforted himself with the toys of the ranching stereotype of the United States frontier or escaped to a gentlemanly retirement on Vancouver Island.

The rancher was an important part of the network of influence that appeared in the west in the 1870's and 1880's. By 1914 he had been isolated from it and his isolation was confirmed in the decades between the wars. His case may represent an extreme but it may also shed light on what happened between east and west after 1895. The word "élite" is one which a Canadian uses with some hesitation, preferring circumlocutions like "those in positions of authority", but there are times when it becomes indispensable. The Canadian élite had adjusted comfortably to the west before 1896, barring such minor unpleasantnesses as the two Riel risings, and had indeed laid out a pattern for its development. The pattern had been followed for more than a generation, proceeding with reasonable decorum if not with particularly spectacular results. The acceleration in the settlement process that began in the mid-nineties produced a new west and indeed, by the stimulus to development it provided, a new Canada. More than a

generation of settlement almost everywhere on the prairies had by this time produced in the prairie west an élite of its own, with a sense of its national as well as its regional rôle. It was not only in southern Alberta that the settlers before the mid-nineties were drawn largely from eastern Canada and from the United Kingdom. After 1895 the newcomers to all parts of the West were increasingly from the United States and from continental Europe.

The new west with its new pattern of close settlement was thus in its ethnic and social mix not entirely to the taste of the earlier generation and certainly not to that of the established élite. The old guard was in no way discouraged by the new situation. They plunged enthusiastically into the exploitation of the opportunities it offered even while resenting the pressures exerted by the massive presence of newcomers with different values. Many of them had by the beginning of the new century built up a substantial stake in the west and the rising property values in what was essentially a gigantic real estate boom gave them the capital for new ventures. My suggestions here are tentative, based on very limited investigation, but my impression is that at least in Alberta they used the growing towns and cities as a base for their operations. Thus as the countryside became increasingly the preserve of American and European settlers the urban centres remained much more under the dominance of elements with strongly British and eastern Canadian affiliations, especially as the towns and cities tended to attract many of the new arrivals from eastern Canada and the United Kingdom. The old élite was thus, if my conclusions are correct, able to make a new stand for old values, at once maintaining contact with eastern Canada and the United Kingdom but at the cost of some alienation from their own hinterland.

An element in the established national system of internal communication was thus preserved but it was no longer an element that could speak with authority for its region as an entity. Its weight in the formation of opinion was thus seriously attenuated. It could present a case but it could not deliver the votes. At the same time, dependent on a hinterland that did not share its attitudes, it was under some pressure to modify its position in a way that would compromise such authority as remained to it in speaking to the élites of other regions. It would be easy in this connection to overlook the effect of the substantial number of immigrants who came to the prairie west from the United Kingdom in the two decades preceding 1914. Though many of them came to farm, they were highly susceptible to the allurements of life both in the western cities and in the smaller towns. Though the effect of their drift in the urban direction was to reinforce the predominance there of English-speaking, Protestant and British oriented

elements, their recent departure from the British Isles gave a particular flavour to their contribution. Irritating though the newcomers from the British Isles might be they moved easily into positions of influence, major as well as minor, free as they were from the handicaps of alien language or citizenship. With no previous Canadian experience they might quickly become westerners but they were less likely to accept the view of Canadian nationhood that was developing in central Canada. From their point of view it was better to be a second-class Englishman than a third-rate American.

In spite of the hardships involved in indiscriminate and uncontrolled settlement, the prairie west was thoroughly convinced of the reality of its own myth as a land of boundless opportunity. The three provinces experienced a remarkable development. They elaborated an institutional framework in terms of public and private services comparable with that which older societies had taken generations to build. The war of 1914-18 shook their immature society to its foundations and much of the energy of the west in the 1920's was spent in repairing a structure which, complex and expensive though it was, had been too rapidly improvised to be entirely sound. The prairie west somehow continued to see itself as a land of opportunity but that illusion was to die in the depression. The ability of what remained of its élite to speak for the prairie west was still further impaired and politically it had become an irrelevance. It might still register and implement decisions made in central Canada, but it had no weight to put behind its desire to be heard in the making of those decisions. When war broke out again in 1939 the prairie west was almost completely disenchanted not only about its own future but also about any prospect of rescue by the central region from the despair into which it had fallen.

The pressures that operate to produce change in the kind of communications network I have been attempting to describe are exceedingly subtle. I venture to suggest that this process could best be observed by the close study of quite small communities, rural as well as urban. Some of these at least are exceedingly well documented and might offer a more manageable unit of study than the larger centres, invaluable as the study of the latter obviously is.

The historian is concerned with communication because it is an extremely important element in the process of change. It is as vital for the conservation of the past as for the illumination of the present. I have suggested that, when Burpee and Wrong were founding this Association, they had the advantage of a working system of internal communication between people with common concerns, a system that

enormously facilitated getting things done. It might be instructive to investigate in more detail the way in which such a system was extended to the west, the way in which it worked there and the way in which it broke down.

Perhaps I may be permitted to sound a more hopeful note. At the first session of this meeting a paper was discussed that dealt with the fortunes of God's chosen people, and particularly the fortunes of six families who between 1793 and 1818 constituted themselves leaders among the élite of Toronto.⁴ Two centuries later, in a tiny foothills town in Alberta, one of those communities that I have suggested might profitably be studied, there existed a family which traced its descent to at least two of those six families. It gave to that little town, among other things, a justice of the peace, the continuing rector's warden of the Anglican church, a female school trustee of quite remarkable strength of character and not unconsiderable influence, and the nearest thing possible to a *salon*, presided over by an old lady who for many years had occupied in Ottawa what I suspect was a sinecure created by John A. Macdonald. Not inappropriately she, like the cousin with whom she lived, had been baptized by John Strachan. Certainly that family kept in good working order its connections with other parts of Canada and indeed with the United Kingdom. It is too much to say that this suggests that this Association in its communications, still preserves something of the atmosphere that facilitated its foundation more than fifty years ago?

NOTES

¹ *Fifty years retrospect, Canada, 1882-1932*, by the Royal Society of Canada, Toronto, 1932. P. 67.

² *Ibid.*

³ David H. Breen, "The Canadian West and the Ranching Frontier, 1875-1922". Ph.D. thesis, University of Alberta, 1972.

⁴ Robert J. Burns, "God's Chosen People: The Origins of Toronto Society, 1793-1818". Paper presented at the 52nd Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Kingston, 1973.